

## **i barely get by. by carolinaa**

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**Summary:**

To be honest, Steve's not handling things that well. *Maybe* he's a little jumpy, and *maybe* he hasn't slept well in a few weeks, but that's his own business. Nobody else's.

## i barely get by.

To put it nicely, Steve Harrington isn't coping.

The whole Upside-Down debacle has been wild, he's been so swept up in it--and pretty busy freaking out--that he hasn't had time to process it. It takes a few days for it to come back to the surface, but now it has, and it's bad.

The nightmares are probably the worst part, but the episodes he's having where he's suddenly unable to breathe and his heart starts stuttering and his chest feels like it's collapsing aren't fun either. He's avoided having one in front of anyone so far, mostly by virtue of avoiding spending time around other people at all. The kids are the only ones he really hangs out with, when he drives them to or from school or gets roped into joining the Dungeons and Dragons game or gives them pep talks before the school dance. They're all great kids, kids that deserve better than the varying levels of trauma they've all endured, and the least Steve can do is keep an eye on them.

Other than them, though, he sticks to himself. His days consist of homework and coffee and napping on the couch with the TV on for background noise. It's not functioning, exactly, but it's what brings him closest to feeling safe, and he's doing his best. His parents haven't been home for six months now, he doesn't know if they will come back for a few more. Nancy and Jonathan are busy being in love, and Tommy and Carol are assholes who he hates.

Joyce is an angel who keeps inviting him over when she invites the rest of the group over, but Steve doesn't want to intrude so much on her hospitality that she starts seeing through how much of a fake Steve is--fake smile, fake personality, fake everything. Steve doesn't need *Joyce Byers* to be disappointed in him.

He just knows he's repulsed by the idea of asking for help. He doesn't want anyone to waste their time worrying about him when they have a lot of other things to be concerned with--not that he expects them to ever give his wellbeing a second thought. Considering that everyone else involved in the whole Upside-Down debacle seems to have become super great friends, Steve doesn't know where he fits in.

He feels like he intrudes whenever he tries to hang out with all of them, like at the dinners that they sometimes have at the Byers', and he's started to make excuses not to go.

The issue with isolating himself from them is that he doesn't have anyone else to turn to. After everything had gone down with the gate and getting a concussion that took a week of rest to get him to stop being dizzy and headache-y, Steve had called his parents to check in. He'd had some bullshit thought about what really matters in life or whatever.

His call to his mom had gone through to her secretary, who told him that she was too busy at the moment, would he call back in a week or so, thanks have a nice day. His call to his dad had ended up being a long lecture about the consequences of failing to meet expectations that left Steve shaking when he finally hung up. He hasn't called again.

He doesn't know how long he's going to be able to act like he's doing fine--the kids aren't dumb by any stretch of the imagination--but he hopes that this phase of being constantly scared and depressed will pass over before that comes up. The less time anyone else spends worrying about him, the better.

"Uh--yeah? I'm great. I've never not been great." Steve knows he sounds fake as hell. Nancy's disbelieving stare agrees with him. Steve's just had one, maybe two seconds of letting his guard down and letting his utter exhaustion show, and that's clearly been a mistake. He hadn't even known Nancy was home, she's just pounced from the shadows like she was waiting for Steve to crack. Because she's a lone wolf-esque hunter who terrifies the shit out of him sometimes. "Are you okay?"

"What? Yes." Nancy shakes her head, momentarily confused and distracted. This could be Steve's opening to run for it-- "This conversation is about you --"

"Cool! Good talk." The last time he'd trusted Nancy had been a mistake and had only ended up hurting him, he's not taking the same

misstep twice. Steve shoves his feet into his shoes without untying them first, they don't even make it all the way on and he starts shuffling towards the front door with his heels hanging out like a moron. "Bye!" he yells to where the dipshits are hanging out in the basement.

One of them, sounding like Lucas, yells something back that's muffled by the walls but is probably disrespectful to his elders. Considering Steve has just suffered through trying to understand Dungeons and Dragons for the last four hours, Lucas should be a little more considerate.

When Steve goes to open the door, Nancy grabs his arm, yanking so Steve stumbles and turns back to face her. "Steve, you can talk to me."

Steve makes one last futile attempt to get his shoes on without his hands. "I'll keep that in mind if anything's ever wrong." He then walks out, the dramatic effect lessened by him tripping over his feet and almost face-planting on his way to his car.

That evening isn't a great one, compounded by his failed math test and Nancy being worried and the living room lights flickering a few times and scaring the shit out of him. As a result, he almost forgets that it's the first day of Chanukah. He remembers right as he's about to fall asleep, and gets off of the couch to go light the candle, hoping that's going to return some semblance of normalcy to his life.

When he was younger, holidays like this one were the only days that he remembers the house being warm and happy and comforting, and that's why he continues celebrating by himself after years of chronically absent parents--he's clinging to the stupid hope that all that will somehow come back if he tries hard enough. He's not sure if there are any other Jewish families in Hawkins, even; at the very least, there aren't any that he knows well enough to invite over. He vaguely remembers other people being at their dinners in the past, but his mom probably wouldn't answer his phone call if he got up the courage to ask.

He manages to scrape some food together, figuring that if he's up he might as well eat, since he hasn't for a day or so. Going without food isn't ideal, but his stomach is so full of anxiety it doesn't even feel like there's room for food. He sits with his plate at the otherwise empty table in the candlelight in an otherwise dark house, the room silent except for the sound of his chewing.

After he eats what his stomach can handle, he pushes his plate aside and puts his head down on folded arms, watching the candle as it steadily burns away in the Hanukiah on the windowsill. Instead of the warmth that he remembers from when he was ten, Steve just feels cold and lonely and sort of pathetic, too, for making this big production for just himself. Maybe he shouldn't have bothered.

The middle school is mostly deserted, a few kids still milling around and waiting for their parents to come pick them up, and Steve starts to get annoyed. He's been waiting for thirty fucking minutes for the gremlins to come out of the middle school so he can drop them off at home and go back to his depressing, empty, cold house to try and take a nap. He checks his watch, he starts searching the schoolyard for any sign of the kids. He finds none.

There's snow starting to fall, and if Steve knows Hawkins, that means that he has a pretty clear window of time in which he can get home without risk of getting into a snow-related car accident. The twerps need to come out pretty soon if they want to make it to their respective homes without incident.

Within five more minutes, his worry is becoming a little more than that. They should *be out here* by now. His stomach starting to hurt because of his anxiety, he scans the area one more time in a last-ditch effort to find them. When they still haven't appeared, and the light snow falling starts to worsen, Steve feels sick.

Something must have happened. They must be lost, hurt, trapped--Steve's about to walk into a middle school and search every classroom for them, if he has to.

Steve's chest feels like someone's pushing on it, pinning it into the

seat behind him and keeping him from getting any air. He pulls his keys out of the ignition and gets out of the car, closing the door as calmly as he can and hurrying across the parking lot to the school. It's already been more than forty minutes, so much could have happened in that time. If they get hurt and it's Steve's fault, he doesn't think he's going to be able to bounce back from that.

He almost bursts into the main building and starts down the hall, glancing through every classroom window he passes, his panic only increasing as he gets deeper into the building. Steve should listen to the kids more carefully, he should know where they hang out, *he should be better than this!*

Turning a corner, he runs right into someone and bounces off, prepared to apologize and move on, but he gets interrupted by the person before he can open his mouth.

"Steve Harrington?" Mr. Clarke asks, sounding bemused, but Steve doesn't have time for any sort of reunion with one of his seventh-grade teachers.

"Do you know where Dustin is?" Steve asks.

Clarke doesn't answer his question. "Are you alright?"

Steve nods, pretty frantic at this point. "Where's Dustin?"

"He's at A.V. Club with his friends," Clarke says, "down the hall. Last meeting before break."

Steve laughs, the sound kind of mechanical and more worrying than reassuring, if the expression on Clarke's face is enough to go by. He feels stupid and relieved and humiliated--it's a Thursday, of course they have A.V. Club. He has no legitimate reason to freak out, and now *Mr. Clarke* of all people has seen him in the middle of a panic attack. "Cool. Cool. Could you tell them that I'm in the car when they're done?"

With that embarrassing encounter done, he turns and shoves his hands into his pockets and hightails it back to the car to wait.

If he didn't care about these toddlers so much, he'd have dropped them all off at the Byers' house before ditching to get home before the storm got too bad, but instead he finds himself in Will's room playing out an impromptu side-campaign, getting his ass handed to him by a mountain troll while they wait for the snow storm outside to die down a little, all because Will had convinced him that they needed another fighter in their party for the fight they thought they were headed into.

The snow had gotten markedly lighter while Steve had been driving them all home from school, but had worsened again by the time they'd reached the Byers'. Steve would have ditched, had he not been convinced by Will looking thrilled at the idea of playing more Dungeons and Dragons and Dustin throwing a fit about not playing if anyone was missing.

"I think I should cast fireball," Steve says on his turn, and there's an eruption of complaints of "no!" and "Steve, what the hell!" and Mike rolls his eyes and says, "Steve, you're a fighter, you don't have magical powers."

"Will just cast it!" Steve points. Will shakes his head, laughing.

"*Will* is a *wizard*," Lucas explains, his voice made of a combination of frustration and fascination with how consistently bad Steve is at this game.

"I'm rolling to cast Fireball," Steve says anyway, and throws the twenty-sided die. It bounces off the small table and there are five seconds of chaos before Max finds it and screams, "*NATURAL TWENTY, BITCHES*," and Dustin won't stop yelling incoherently and Mike puts his face in his hands.

"Will?" Joyce says from the hallway, and the group falls quiet for Will to answer, "Yeah?"

Joyce opens the door to Will's bedroom, and waves hello to the assorted goblins and Steve. She's so polar-opposite of Steve's mom that he's still thrown off by how nice she is. "It's not getting better outside, I think your friends should stay over."

“I can drive them home, Mrs. Byers,” Steve offers, but he isn’t sure of his car’s ability to handle the roads and she’s hoping she’ll say no to putting any children in his care. He doesn’t care about driving himself home, but it’s probably not a great idea to put anybody else in danger.

Joyce seems to come to the same conclusion. “No, I think it’s best we all just stay in for tonight until they get the roads cleared. That includes you, Steve.”

“Are you sure? I think it’ll be fine--”

“No, the weather station says it’s not going to stop for a couple more hours.” She sighs. “Jonathan can help get everyone situated, okay, Will? I’m going to bed.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Will says.

All the others chorus a “Goodnight, Mrs. Byers,” and she smiles at them before looking at Steve and saying, “Can I borrow you for a second?”

“Yeah, sure.” Steve points to Max. “Take my turn for me, Mike won’t let me do anything cool.”

“You can’t use magic , no matter how good your roll is--” Mike protests, but Max holds up the die and says “It was a natural twenty, you have to let him do *something* -”

Steve leaves and isn’t nervous about the conversation he’s about to have with Joyce until she walks him to the kitchen, where she stops and gives him a Mom Look, and he immediately knows what she’s going to ask.

Sure enough, she gives him a once-over and asks, “Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You look exhausted, honey.”

Steve can’t remember the last time his own mom checked in on him

like this, the last time they even had a conversation. Maybe that's why it's harder to brush off Joyce's concern than it was to ignore Nancy or Mr. Clarke. "The kids are pretty wild."

Joyce doesn't look convinced that that's the issue. She's moved on from the fact that Steve used to be a pretty shitty person to her son, it seems she has an infinite capacity to worry about people. "Have you been sleeping?"

Steve nods.

She frowns, but thankfully doesn't question him further. Instead, she picks up a tiny netted bag of chocolate coins off the counter and presses it into his hands. "I hope I'm not too late, but. Happy Chanukah."

Steve stares at the gift. He knows he shouldn't take it, that he shouldn't let Joyce spend money on him, that he doesn't really need any sort of present, but he *wants it*. The first three days of Chanukah have been uneventful, consisting of him just lighting the candles and saying the prayer and pushing food around his plate for half an hour before giving up. Joyce checking in on him is the first time he's felt any love come out of it.

"Thank you," he finally manages, his voice sounding choked.

"I'm too late, huh?" she asks.

"No, it's--it's day four." Steve gives a small laugh, swipes at his eye with the back of his hand because he can't cry in front of *Joyce Byers*. "How did you--?"

"I went to school with your mom." Joyce shrugs, a tiny movement, like it's just second nature to her to remember tiny details about people and then act on them thirty years later.

Steve nods twice. He's focusing mostly on keeping his shit together. He doesn't tell her that he's gotten used to celebrating alone, that this is the first gelt he's gotten in years, that this is the closest he's come to experiencing parental love since he was ten.

He doesn't have to--Joyce seems to be able to infer all this from the

fact that he's blinking too quickly to be natural and his hands are clutching the coins like they're the only thing keeping him upright. She opens her mouth to say something else, probably a veiled question to find out if his parents are doing their job, but then they both hear a door open and Dustin yells, "Steve, shit's getting wild!"

Steve wipes his eyes again. "Thank you," he says, then forces himself to go back, both to the game and to being fine, leaving Joyce in the kitchen. She doesn't need any more needy kids on her plate.

The shitheads are too riled up to sleep much, and Steve is just grateful that there's no school the next day. He gets up the next morning around eight, which seems like the earliest he can get away with giving up on sleeping, and goes to the kitchen to make some breakfast.

Between all of the kids, there had only been one nightmare--Will startling awake around four and looking around with panicked eyes, checking on all his friends to make sure they were okay. Upon finding Steve already awake and keeping guard, Will had looked somewhat comforted, if not a little embarrassed, and had gone back to sleep. One nightmare out of five kids was a pretty drastic improvement from the first sleepover they'd all had, but Steve kind of wishes Will could catch a break for one night.

There's not a lot to choose from in the cupboards, so Steve settles on making pancakes from scratch and some scrambled eggs. He's flipping the first of the pancakes onto a plate when Jonathan walks in.

Seeing Jonathan's look of confusion, Steve gestures in the direction of the living room, where the kids are still asleep. "Your mom told me I wasn't allowed to drive in the storm."

Jonathan shakes his head. "No, I know. I just didn't know you could cook."

"It's just pancakes, dude."

“It’s impressive.” Jonathan almost smiles. “Did the kids keep you up late?”

“Nah, not that bad.” Steve pours more batter into the pan. “Feel free to help yourself before they all wake up.”

As if on cue, one of the gremlins says “Is that breakfast?” in the living room, and Jonathan leaps into action. He’s seen the kids completely demolish a breakfast spread before, he knows he needs to move fast. He and Steve move around each other. By the time Max skids around the corner and makes a beeline for the food set out, Jonathan is sitting on the counter to eat and watching the pancakes that are on the stove while Steve hunts around for some frozen orange juice that’s allegedly somewhere in the freezer.

“Wash your hands first,” Steve snaps without even taking his head out of the freezer.

Max audibly rolls her eyes as she says, “Whatever,” but he hears the sink turn on anyway. It appears she’ll listen to instructions if there’s food on the line.

It’s the first meal he’s spent with other people in a long time--and it’s the first time his cooking hasn’t just been for himself to pick at. It’s almost like he belongs there with them, and he savors the moment while it lasts, even with his brain telling him over and over that he should leave before they get annoyed with him.

The phone rings the next morning, almost scaring Steve out of his skin. It takes him a few seconds to recover and get to answering it, shuffling his feet across the floor towards the receiver.

“Steve?” his mother asks when he picks up.

Steve stands bolt upright, not believing his ears. “Mom?” he asks back.

“Oh, hi, honey! I was just calling to check in!” She sounds too cheery, too bright, like an LED light where a candle should be. “Happy Chanukah, sweetheart!”

“It’s the sixth day already,” Steve says, his voice a little too sharp. He should be grateful she’s calling at all, this is more than he got on his birthday.

“You *know* work gets busy during the holidays, Steve.” Steve’s mother asks, sounding like she’s losing a little bit of her cheer, and if he isn’t careful she might never call like this again. “I expect you to be understanding of that, you’re almost an adult now.”

Steve just says a defeated, “I know.” He wants to tell her that it’s been almost three months since she called last, she doesn’t have an excuse, that he knows she’s cheating on her husband as much as he’s cheating on her, that her son is so depressed he might not make it to Passover if things continue downwards like they have. “I get it.”

“I know you do. I gotta get back to work now. Have a good evening, okay?” She makes an obnoxious kissy noise into the receiver. “Bye, honey.”

“I love you,” Steve says, but the other line has already clicked off.

A few hours later, after Steve has gotten a grip on himself and he’s stopped crying like a huge baby about missing his parents, the phone rings again. He doesn’t answer it. He’s back on the couch where he spends the majority of his days, a blanket around his shoulders and the TV off and the window open enough for him to hear the silence of snow falling outside and the thermostat turned down so he can feel the chill from outside fill the room.

Around five, he hears a car pull into the driveway, and then a few minutes later, there’s a knock at the door. Steve knows he’s a mess--he hasn’t done his hair or gotten dressed, he hasn’t eaten or slept since being at the Byers’ yesterday morning--and he should probably ignore whoever it is until they go away. He’s been dozing for a few hours now, and now that he’s fully awake, he’s freezing. He should have closed the window a while ago, the blanket isn’t doing much and he can see his breath in the air in front of him.

Whoever it is pounds on the door again, and Steve walks to the

door to see who it is. Chief Hopper is on his doorstep, for some reason.

Steve opens the door, confused and kind of shivering.

Hopper's eyes move from Steve to the blanket to the dark house behind him, quick and analytical, but he doesn't mention any of it. He instead shifts on his feet, tips his head towards the cruiser parked in the driveway. "We're having a sort of Christmas Eve dinner at the Henderson's. Do you want to come over?"

"Who's 'we'?"

"Does it matter? Free food."

Steve thinks about it. "I don't celebrate Christmas" is what he settles on.

"It can be whatever holiday you need it to be. Come get a meal and I won't tell Joyce about the snow blowing into your sitting room," Hopper says, exasperated and terrifying.

"Gimme five," Steve says meekly, and goes to find a comb and some presentable clothes.

They arrive after a spectacularly awkward car ride--Hopper aggressively doesn't make conversation and Eleven just watches Steve in the rearview mirror where he sits in the backseat.

Mrs. Henderson is all smiles when she sees Steve, chattering about how she hasn't seen him in a few weeks and how she misses him. Steve survives the encounter and finds himself steered into the front room, which has a lit-up tree in the corner and people taking up all available sitting space.

Some children scream "*Steve!*" and barrel towards him. Steve barely has time to brace himself before they hit with the apparent express intent to knock him over. He finds himself on his back, all the air knocked out of him, Max laughing and Dustin counting out loud like a wrestling referee and Will giggling as he tries to extract himself

from the pile.

Dustin reaches ten and is apparently satisfied with his pin, rolling off of Steve and saying, “Merry Christmas, dude!”

Max gets up too, her face flushed and looking genuinely happy as she laughs again. “Dustin didn’t think you were going to come and now he owes me ten dollars,” she says matter-of-factly.

“He doesn’t have ten dollars,” Will informs Steve, his face very serious.

Steve pushes himself back up into a sitting position and coughs because getting hit with three entire thirteen-year-olds, while endearing, isn’t comfortable. “Dustin, o ye of little faith, I think you got what you deserved.”

“Hey, I was just being *realistic*, you’re like a hermit lately!”

“Like I would miss out on a chance to bother you, you *animals*,” Steve ruffles Will’s hair and then enlists Dustin and Max to help him get back to his feet. They complain the entire time, but are actually a lot stronger than he thought they would be.

Now that he’s not under imminent attack, he scopes the room more thoroughly. Jonathan and Joyce are on the couch, both nursing big mugs of hot cocoa. Mrs. Henderson has taken the armchair, and Hopper has sat down next to her in a chair that’s been appropriated from the dining room.

Steve has a moment of uncertainty where he doesn’t know if he’s expected to sit and join the adults or something, but the kids seemingly sense his hesitation. Dustin grabs his arm and Max starts pushing him towards the hallway and Will starts chirping about some early Christmas present and Eleven materializes and joins the pack and Steve soon finds himself in Dustin’s room instead.

“Where are Lucas and Mike?” he asks.

“Mike is with his family.” Eleven finally speaks up.

“Yeah, his mom wouldn’t let him out of the family dinner. And

Lucas's family does a caroling thing every year on Christmas Eve, I don't even know, I guess it was important for him to be there." Dustin flops onto his bed, then scoots over for Will to have a spot to sit. Steve understands the underlying implication that Lucas's family is the only one functional and unified enough for it to actually be okay for him to miss something like this.

Max sits cross-legged on the floor, leaning against the bookshelf. "Sucks for Mike," she says.

"Sucks," Eleven and Will agree at the same time, and Will gives her a quick smile and Eleven looks at him for a moment before doing an awkward finger gun. Max loses her shit.

Dinner itself is much more wonderful than anything Steve deserves, and far less awkward than previously anticipated. He sits between Joyce and Max, the former of whom keeps slipping more food onto his plate because she notices he's not eating as much as everyone else, and the latter of whom keeps slipping more food onto his plate because she's helping herself to every dish on the table despite the fact that most of them don't satisfy her picky tastes.

Steve manages to keep up with the conversations happening around him, and he finds he's enjoying himself. Everyone is in a good mood, which is sort of surreal to him--even his best memories of holidays with his parents end with them getting annoyed with him or with each other. That doesn't seem to be the case here, with the mulled wine the adults are drinking not making any of them more aggressive and the quick banter the kids are continually keeping up not devolving into serious arguments. It's *nice*. He keeps relaxing by increments, his paranoia and jagged edges starting to dissolve a little.

After they're done eating, Steve helps clear the table and finds himself in the kitchen washing dishes, despite Mrs. Henderson's protests that she'll take care of them later. He's joined by Jonathan, who picks up a towel and starts drying and also fends off Joyce, who tries to come help too, saying that she should go play board games with the rest of them. She relents after a few minutes, and Jonathan grins at her in a way that makes Steve's chest hurt.

The two of them are quiet for a while, but it's Jonathan who finally speaks. "I'm glad you could come."

Steve nods, finds that he already has a smile on his face. "Me too."

There's more quiet between them, and then Steve ventures a, "I didn't get anybody anything, is that shitty of me?"

Jonathan snorts as he puts a stack of plates back in the cupboard. "I wouldn't sweat it, it's not your holiday."

Steve just looks at him, unsatisfied with the answer.

"What? Did you want me to say you being here is gift enough?" Jonathan challenges, and Steve is so surprised he barks a laugh before splashing water in Jonathan's direction. Jonathan sputters and lunges forward to return the favor.

After doing the dishes devolves into him and Jonathan throwing soapy water at each other and making the kitchen a general warzone, they're cut off and sent away to the living room for Hopper to take over. They end up on the couch, both still kind of giggling, and Steve has no idea what's gotten into him but it feels great.

The rascals and Joyce are engaged in a heated game of *Sorry!*, their voices continually raising in volume--apparently Dungeons and Dragons isn't the only game they get emotionally invested in. Joyce and Eleven are on a team together, because Eleven doesn't understand the rules, but both of them are equally intense and in it to win it, to a degree that's very intimidating. Will is playing a very poised and calm game--it looks like he's winning, because he's not taking every chance to sabotage everyone else like Max is. Dustin is losing, badly, but Steve refuses to get involved.

"I need your help here, buddy!" Dustin whines after Max knocks his leading piece back home and, on their next turn, Joyce-and-Eleven get the other one.

"Sucks to suck, dude," Steve tells him, and hears Jonathan's quiet laugh next to him.

Will wins, which causes general uproar, including Dustin flipping the

board and sending pieces everywhere. Eleven huffs, looking a little angry, but seems appeased when Joyce puts a hand on her head and congratulates her on a good game.

Mrs. Henderson appears with more hot chocolate on a tray, like an angel, and sends Dustin to go get blankets from the closet after he's done cleaning up the pieces of the game. Thus, within minutes, Steve finds himself covered in a thick wool blanket and holding a mug of hot chocolate and basically being the most comfortable he's ever been in his life. Max and Will squeeze onto the couch between Steve and Jonathan, and Dustin makes a very fluffy-looking pile of blankets on the ground for him and Eleven to sit on as Mrs. Henderson finds a copy of some old Christmas movie Steve has never seen and puts it on.

With the quiet buzz of conversation and the background noise from the TV and the warmth from the blanket and his drink, Steve starts to drift off. He keeps shifting to keep himself awake, knowing that the last thing anyone wants is a weird teenager snoring on their couch, but the drowsiness is hard to fight. Eventually, someone--Joyce?--takes the mug from his hands and runs a hand over his hair and says, "This is on the coffee table for later, okay?" and Steve's already closing his eyes and drifting off.

He's gently nudged awake to find the movie over and a child asleep against his shoulder. Chief Hopper is the one waking him up with a light hand on his knee. "I'm gonna head out, do you want a ride home?"

Steve doesn't want to go back to cold and dark and alone, but he doesn't really have a choice in the matter. He begins the very slow and elaborate process of trying to extricate himself from the couch without waking Max up. He succeeds, but she looks progressively grumpy and keeps trying to latch onto his arm. He steps over a sleeping Dustin to go put his shoes on.

Hopper goes and scoops Eleven up, then heads for the door as well. Both moms follow.

Mrs. Henderson hands Steve a Tupperware full of leftovers and pats his face with her hand. “Merry Christmas,” she says, and he nods, taking the food and thanking her twice for letting him come over. “You’re welcome anytime,” she says earnestly, almost earnest enough that Steve would take her up on the offer, and then she retreats back to the living room.

“Have a good night, sweetie,” Joyce says as he puts on his coat. “Call if you need anything, alright?”

He knows better than to argue. “Can do, Mrs. Byers.”

*“Anything,”* she says again, her gaze intense.

“Okay,” he says, but his voice sort of wavers, for some reason. The evening has left him feeling weirdly open and raw, like being around people in a positive way like this has broken him. He clears his throat and looks out to the car, where Hopper has maneuvered the back door open and is situating Eleven in the backseat.

Joyce watches as he walks across the icy driveway to the car. He climbs in and buckles his seatbelt, trapping his hands between his legs to keep them warm. Joyce waves from the doorway, and Steve watches out the window until he can’t see the Hendersons’ house anymore.

He breaks the silence after a few minutes. “Thanks for bringing me.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” Hopper takes a corner very gently to avoid disturbing Eleven, who’s sort of snoring. “It seems like it was good for you.” When Steve doesn’t say anything, he continues. “Joyce wants you to stop isolating yourself.”

“Does she want you to stop isolating yourself, too, or...”

Hopper’s eyes crinkle up at the corners, just a little, but then he’s serious again and Steve wonders if he imagined it. “You went through shit with us too.”

“Well, I kinda just dropped in at the end.” Steve’s experience with the Upside-Down is like the time he was fighting a chimaera in Dungeons and Dragons and Will swooped in at the last minute and killed it for

him, taking all the experience points and loot. Except Steve hasn't even killed anything, he's ended up herding a bunch of preschoolers around and the only loot so far has been psychological trauma.

The car slows to a stop outside Steve's house, and he suddenly hates the idea of going inside, the wall of comfort he's built up over the last few hours is starting to crumble already. Walking through the front door is always the scariest, because of the approximately four hundred and fifty nightmares he's had about being greeted by a demogorgon or flashing lights or anything, really. He glances over at Hopper, who's watching him closely.

"Happy holidays," Steve says, swallows the lump of fear in his throat, and gets out of the car.

The next evening, while he's making dinner, Steve feels like he's cracking. His hands are really shaky and his chest is doing the weird tight thing that it's been making a habit of lately, both so bad he'd dropped three matches before succeeding in lighting the attendant candle. It's been a rough day, he hasn't been able to sleep and his brain is determined to make him feel as awful as possible--the favorite train of thought currently being that Steve should go sit out in the snow until he freezes and do a favor for everyone (which is the reason why all the windows are open. He's compromising).

Point being, he's already struggling when he hears the noise upstairs.

Upon hearing it, Steve jumps, bumps the frying pan with his arm. He thinks quickly enough to catch it with his bare hand and knock it back onto the stove in one jerky motion, then bites down on a scream--burns *suck*--because the focus is not getting mauled by a demogorgon right now.

The upstairs sound had been tiny, too quiet to really pick out what it was, but he's still frantically searching the kitchen for a weapon he's ready to face a monster with. Most of his cooking knives are too small to make much of an impact, and his bat is locked in the trunk of his car. He takes a knife, flicks the lights off, then takes the phone off the receiver and shakily dials the first number he thinks of.

Steve hasn't heard another noise yet, and he's praying that the noise of the pan incident wasn't enough to alert the monster to exactly where he is.

Joyce answers on the first ring. "Hello?"

"I need help." Steve breathes out before he can think about the fact that he needs to save his breath, he's not doing so hot at getting any back in. "I really-really need you to send Jonathan over, I need--"

"What's going on?" Joyce demands, not angry, but something in that vicinity. "Are you safe?"

"There's something in my house, I-I *heard it*, I heard something--" Steve sobs, then claps a hand over his mouth and looks out into the hallway, bracing himself to see something jump out at him.

"We're headed over. You're going to be fine, please stay safe, okay?" Joyce says, and hangs up, leaving Steve alone again.

He can hold out for ten minutes, Steve tells himself. It's just ten minutes, and he can back into a corner and be silent and get a grip so he can help Jonathan fight when he gets here. Steve slides down against a cabinet, clutching the knife and almost vibrating with fear and realizing too late that he hasn't blown out the candles and he's a fucking moron.

The next thing he's really aware of is something touching his arm, and he jolts, swinging the knife in an arc that's interrupted by something grabbing his wrist. He sees the knife clatter across the kitchen floor, and he also hears himself make a terrified, wheezy noise that would be incredibly embarrassing if he had the capacity to care.

-- *Hey*, someone says, and he blinks, jerking his head up to look at them.

It's Chief Hopper, and he looks concerned--well, he's past concern now and more into fear. His eyebrows are furrowed even more than usual and he's gripping Steve's arm and examining the burn covering most of his hand. "Breathe, kid."

Steve shakes his head, gesturing frantically to the hallway. “There’s something *here*. ”

“Nothing is here,” Hopper tells him, and puts a heavy hand on Steve’s shoulder, looks him dead in the eye. “You’re safe now, I’m here with Joyce, okay?”

“Why the hell is Joyce here? I’m--”

“The only thing you are right now is hypothermic, so cut the shit, Harrington.” Hopper gets up and pulls Steve to his feet. “Nothing’s here. You have mice upstairs, or something. Why the hell are all your windows open?”

Steve doesn’t answer, he’s focusing on getting his feet to move correctly. He finds himself at the kitchen table in a seat that’s been turned out to face Joyce, who’s also seated. Despite the supposed hypothermia, Steve’s face is burning with embarrassment, and he watches the candles over her shoulder instead of making eye contact.

“Close all the windows and turn on the thermostat, Hopper. I saw a blanket on the couch,” Joyce says, and reaches out to gently hold Steve’s uninjured hand. “How long have your parents been gone, honey?”

He wants to lie and make her worry about him less, but his brain isn’t working right, so instead he says, “June.” He barely even remembers his parents’ last visit, it had only lasted a few days and they had spent most of the time screaming at him because he was rocking straight F’s on his report card.

Joyce frowns.

“I’m an adult,” he points out. “I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, and we have every reason to believe you right now,” Hopper says. A thick blanket that’s definitely not the thin monstrosity from the couch drops onto Steve’s shoulders. “Looks like you’ve got the situation completely under control.”

Steve glares at the kitchen floor and pulls the blanket tighter around himself.

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?” Hopper demands. “We offered on multiple occasions to have you over or help out with anything.”

“You don’t have to deal with my bullshit.”

“Steve, it’s not weak to ask for help,” Joyce tries, but Steve doesn’t want her pity either.

“I know it isn’t!” he says, clenching his jaw to stop the chattering.

Joyce’s worried facial expression is gone, and she looks a little more annoyed. Good. If Steve’s going to drive them away, he’s going to have to be nasty enough to deter *Joyce Byers*, and it seems like that isn’t as impossible as he previously thought. “Steve, you don’t get to choose who cares about you.”

“And I’m *telling* you, I don’t deserve this!”

Whatever Joyce was going to say next, she stops before she can get there, snapping her mouth shut. Behind her, where he’s been messing with the food, Hopper pauses and looks over at him. The quiet in the kitchen is too sudden for Steve to be comfortable with it.

Steve yanks on the blanket with both hands so that it digs into his neck. “Sorry. Look, I’m sorry for bothering you, I’m just a little high-strung lately. It’s--it was my bad. You can go--”

“Harrington--” Hopper starts, as Steve stands, sending the chair scraping back across the floor.

“--You can go, it’s fine--”

“Harrington!” Hopper says a little more forcefully. “Sit down.”

Steve doesn’t sit, but he stops and looks at them. His teeth have started chattering again.

“Would you like to come spend the night at our house?” Joyce asks, breaking a few moments of silence. “We could make some food with Will and Jonathan.”

Steve’s gaze flickers to the windowsill, where the candles are close to

burnt out, then to his ruined food on the stove, then to Joyce and Hopper, who are both staring at him, waiting for his response.

“Yeah,” he finally says, his voice tired. “Yeah, that would be cool.”

The car ride over to the Byers’ house is quiet and still, and Steve does his best to not bring any more attention to himself, hunched over in the backseat of Hopper’s cruiser and shaking with cold. The thick blanket is helping, and he knows that he needs to get his shit together before he sees Jonathan and Will, so he just tries to think warm thoughts.

They pull into the driveway, and Steve follows Joyce and Hopper into the house.

Inside, the house couldn’t be more polar opposite of Steve’s. There aren’t any lights hung up--bad connotations for several of the Byers--but there’s a Christmas tree with a lot of ornaments and the heating is up on full blast and there’s laughter coming from one of the rooms. Steve feels out of place and cold. Mostly cold.

“Hi, boys!” Joyce calls, and gets two affirmative responses in return.

“Is Steve okay?” Will asks.

“Yeah!” Joyce says, even as she’s looking Steve over with an extremely worried gaze. “Hop’s gonna get dinner on, okay?”

There’s another grunt that sounds like Jonathan, which both adults apparently take as agreement.

Hopper turns and puts a hand on Steve’s back and pushes him towards the couch in the living room, and then he disappears into the kitchen, mumbling something to Joyce that Steve doesn’t hear. Joyce settles on the couch next to Steve and turns on the TV, and they sit in quiet for a minute.

“Are you still cold, honey?” she asks.

The couch is so comfortable, and it’s so bright and warm in this

house, and the TV is playing a movie that Steve used to watch when he was little, and Joyce the kindest person in the world. Steve can feel his hands again, and for the first time this week, doesn't want to crash his car into a tree. The blanket is soft. There's food in the kitchen, and Will and Jonathan are right down the hall. Everyone is safe.

Steve starts to cry.

Because of his luck, it's not even subtle. His breath just catches and then he's pitching forward, feeling like he's going to throw up but a sob comes out, loud and shuddering and awful. He pulls his arms closer into him, a last-ditch effort to hide under the blanket, but Joyce pulls him over to her and he finds that he's being hugged instead.

He leans into her, too exhausted to fight anymore. "I'm--I'm *sorry*," he says, because he's getting her shirt all gross, but she shushes him. "No--you didn't, you didn't bring me here, just to...just to cry all over--over your couch, I'm *really* so-*orry*--"

"Sweetheart, breathe, you're hurting yourself," Joyce cuts him off to say.

Steve coughs and chokes on his tears, but gives up on talking for the moment.

"Let it out," Joyce says, and pats the back of his head softly.

It takes him a while to do that--it seems like all the emotions Steve represses in his day-to-day don't just go away, and they've been piling up, waiting for him to break down. He does eventually starts to wind down, however, which is when Joyce quietly asks, "Have you been all alone this whole time?"

Steve sits up a little, and accepts the tissue box that Joyce pushes into his lap. His nose is stuffy, and his head is throbbing, but something in his chest feels a little lighter. He mops at his face clumsily. "My parents are busy," he says, and sniffles. "I'm fine, honestly--it's just a big house, sometimes. You know?" He tries to laugh and somehow, more tears leak out. Steve isn't putting up a very good image of being

functional, what with the half-hour-long meltdown he just had. That doesn't mean he can't try. "And it's Chanukah, which isn't really a big deal usually but it is to *me*, and--"

He's veering into oversharing territory. He shuts his mouth and half-chuckles and hunches his shoulders. He doesn't remember the last time he cried like this. He's definitely cried recently, and more often than he would like, but big sobbing episodes aren't usually his style. He feels like a wet dishrag.

Joyce hasn't removed her arm from around him, and he's leaning too much into her for him to really be playing it cool, but that's okay.

"You deserve a good winter break," Joyce says. "All you kids do, after what you've been through."

Steve doesn't have it in him to make eye contact, but he turns his head a little to acknowledge her, keeping his eyes on the carpet. "It's not--! I wasn't even there for most of the whole Upside-Down thing, I'm being fucking-- *freaking* ridiculous, sorry."

Joyce snorts. "You have just as much right as I do."

Joyce is a saint who lost her boyfriend and almost her son to monsters from a different dimension, and Steve is a sniveling teenager crying on her couch because his holiday isn't up to standard. Steve is about to rephrase this in a more polite way when Joyce seemingly senses what he's thinking and says, "We all handle things differently, alright? And I've been around people that care, which makes things better. You need a night off."

Steve accepts this without arguing, mostly because he's realizing that he's exhausted. Joyce ruffles his hair, and he almost dissolves into tears again at the soft touch. "I'm going to go see where dinner's at, alright?"

He nods, wiping his face with the blanket and blinking a few times to clear his vision.

"Don't fall asleep before I get back with your food," Joyce says, and stands up, heading for the kitchen.

Steve hears Hopper's voice rumbling, probably asking if it's safe for him to go out in the living room without Steve crying on him. Joyce's voice is too low for Steve to make out any words, but she sounds worried, which grates on Steve's skin a little.

Will and Jonathan appear, emerging from the hallway, Will carrying a glass of water. Neither of them bat an eyelash at Steve's disheveled appearance, despite the fact that Steve must look like quite the disaster at the moment. Will offers Steve the water, which Steve readily accepts.

"You feeling any better?" Jonathan asks.

Steve nods, and finds that he's drained the glass.

Will perches on the couch on one side of Steve, and Jonathan flops down into Joyce's vacated spot. Jonathan puts Steve's empty glass on the coffee table. Nobody says much, and Steve has the feeling that his general air of despair kind of discourages conversation.

"Happy Chanukah," Will finally chirps, sort of cautiously, like he isn't sure if that's what he's supposed to say.

Even though, up to this point, it hasn't been a very happy one, it's looking up now. Steve finds that he's almost smiling as he responds, "Thanks, kiddo."

#### **Author's Note:**

OK i might write some other things exploring how other ppl are coping bc s2 was WHACK but i'm tired so i just wrote some steve stuff. you feel? anyway,

1. i wanted more dustin in this and there is actually some stuff i wrote w steve and dustin but it didnt work with the flow. rip. press f to pay respects

2. i don't want it to be misconstrued that i wanted the message to be that steve is sad and isolated bc he is jewish/doesnt celebrate christmas. the thing is that

he's isolating himself already and his family isn't around and he's trying to carry on being normal and functional so his holidays are all skiwampus, and that gets a little bit better because he remembers that people care about him. his situation is NOT improved bc some benevolent goyim came and "rescued him" that's 100% not what i'm going for--it just seemed wrong to set this around the winter holiday season and completely ignore steve's holiday. and i hc him as jewish. so!

3. this is me just giving a hug to myself. i know it's been like 8 years since s2 came out don't @ me! bye